Apostasy in Islam
(Irtidãd)

Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi

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In the name of Allãh, the Beneficent, the Merciful.
May Allãh send His blessings upon Muhammad & his progeny.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of apostasy *(irtidãd)* and the punishment that Islam has prescribed for an apostate is one of the least known and understood part of the *sharī'a* (Islamic laws). After the concept of jihãd, apostasy is most frequently cited by Christian missionaries as a negative dimension of Islam.[1]

In 1997, a question was forwarded to me by the Aalim Network of Ahlul Bayt Discussion Group (ABDG) about the punishment given to an apostate. I could sense the plea for understanding the law of Islam and the rationale behind that law. And since, it is a very complex and sensitive issue, I wrote a detailed answer using the notes I had from a talk that I had given in Toronto in May 1990. Few months after this

1 These missionaries seem to forget the infamous Inquisition, witch-hunting and witch-burning rituals perpetuated by their forbearers when Christian rule prevailed in post-Muslim Spain.

answer was circulated via the internet to the ABDG subscribers, I wrote another article in June 1998 giving further details from the jurisprudential point of view.

What you see in your hand is the collection of these two articles. First we shall explain our view about faith in God and whether or not Islam can be forcefully imposed on others; then comes the Islamic view on the choices a person has after he has willingly joined the Islamic faith. Next, we shall discuss the issue of apostasy and its two categories; followed by the religious sources for the punishment of an apostate. The treatise ends with a discussion on some Qur'ãnic verses and some relevant issues about minorities in the Muslim countries.

2. FAITH IN GOD: A NATURAL INSTINCT

According to Islam, every child is born with the innate ability to know and believe in his Creator; this cognition has been placed by God into his nature (*fitra*). The Qur'ãn describes the human soul in a very beautiful way. After swearing by the most majestic signs of God's creation, it says: *"...and by the soul and He who perfected it! Then He inspired to it [the ability to understand] what is good for it and what is evil for it. Successful is he who purifies it, and failure is he who corrupts it."* (91:1-10)

Almighty Allãh has made our souls such that we are able to distinguish between what is good and what is evil. But for human soul to function on its *fitra,* there is a condition—it must be kept pure, it must be immunized against spiritual corruption. The soul is like a bulb which can give light provided it itself is not surrounded with a thick cover or dust; every human being has that light in his soul; however, those who keep it pure can enlighten their path with it while those who allow the 'spiritual dirt' to gather upon it cannot see the

path towards Allãh. (Incidentally, *kufr* [infidelity] literally means a cover, and so it implies that *kufr* prevents the inner light from showing the right path.) The Prophet of Islam emphasized the same point when he said, "Every child is born with the believing nature *(al-fitra),* it is his parents who make him into a Jew or a Christian."[2]

Besides this *fitra*, Allãh has also provided us with various means to know Him and believe in Him; He sent prophets and messengers, He revealed the scriptures, and above all He created thousands of signs in the nature which remind us of Him. *"Soon We shall show them Our signs on the horizon (ãfãq) and in themselves (anfus), until it becomes clear to them that this is the Truth."* (41:53)

3. CAN ISLAM BE FORCED ON OTHERS?

Having accepted that from the Islamic point of view, faith in God is ingrained in human nature, and that it is only the parents and the society that corrupt the soul and divert it from the Right Path, the question comes: Can Islam be imposed forcefully on non-Muslims? Or we may even ask: Is the minor *jihãd* a means of imposing the faith of Islam on non-Muslims?

I do not intend to get into the issue of the minor *jihãd;* but, briefly stated, the majority of Shī'ī jurists *(mujtahidīn)* do not believe in initiating a *jihãd* without the clear permission of an infallible *(ma'sũm)* Imam. Even those who allow the initiation of jihãd, do not believe that jihãd can be used to impose Islam on non-Muslims. At the most, they say that jihãd can be initiated to remove tyranny and oppression from a non-Muslim society in order to eliminate the factors that

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2 Al-Kulayni, *al-Usul mina 'l-Kãfi,* vol. 2, p. 13; al-Bukhãri, *Sahīh,* vol. 2 (Beirut: Dãr al-Fikr, 1401) p. 104; for its Arabic edition with English translation, see vol. 2 (Beirut: Dãr al-'Arabiyya) p. 262.

prevent the Divine message from reaching to the masses. Jihãd cannot be used for imposing Islam on others; it is just for putting an end to the aggression on Muslims or for helping the oppressed non-Muslims. (The history of Muslims bears out this idea; an unbiased historian can clearly separate the spread of the Muslim rule over areas outside Arabia –by military might– and the spread of Islam –without force– in those same regions.)[3]

The Qur'ãn clearly says that, *"There is no compulsion in the religion."* (2:256) What this verse actually means is that: "There is no compulsion in [accepting] the religion [of Islam]." Why? The verse continues, *"Surely the Right Path is clearly distinct from the crooked path."* So Muslims can always show the difference between the right and the wrong paths, but not force the non-Muslims to accept Islam.

The Prophet of Islam has also been mentioned as a reminder, not as a person who forces Islam upon others. *"Therefore, you remind (them), for you are only a reminder; you are not a watcher over them."* (88:21-22) In many other verses, the Prophet is described as "a bearer of good news and a warner of God's punishment." (2:119) His role was just to remind the people about their natural instinct of believing in God. Force is not needed because the right way is clearly distinct from the crooked way. Even during the conquest of Mecca, the idol-worshippers were given a grace time of four months to study Islam, and thereafter either become Muslims by their own choice or leave the sacred city.[4]

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3 See Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988) p. 243-244; M. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam,* vol. 1, p. 199. For more details, see my "How Did Islam Spread? By Sword or By Conversion?"

4 See Chapter 9 of the Qur'ãn.

4. WHAT AFTER SUBMISSION?

What we have said above was about accepting Islam, coming into the fold of Islam. We have made it very clear that no one can be forcefully brought into the fold of Islam; Islam cannot be imposed on any person or society. This was all about a person who is outside the fold of Islam.

Now we move on to the next step. If a person is raised in a society which protects his soul from the impurities of atheism *(kufr)* and polytheism *(shirk)*, or if a person is shown the Right Path and accepts it willingly — can such a person reject the Islamic faith? Is he allowed to apostate (become *murtad*) and renounce Islam? Can he declare that he does not believe in God or Prophet Muhammad or the Day of Judgement?

Once a person enters into the fold of Islam, the rules change. As soon as you become a Muslim by your own choice, you are expected to submit yourself to Allãh totally and completely. *"O You who believe! Enter into submission, kãffatan!"* (2:208) *Kãffatan* gives the sense of "all" and "completely". Once a person becomes a believer, he surrenders the right of making decisions to Allãh and the Messenger: *"No believing man and no believing woman has a choice in their own affairs when Allãh and His Messenger have decided on an issue."* (33:36)

Even the question of apostasy, *irtidãd* or deserting of one's faith, for a Muslim, is a religious (*shar'ī*) issue and even in this issue he is governed by the laws of Islam. And Islam clearly says: No! You cannot become an apostate. After coming into the fold of Islam, rejection of the fundamentals is not tolerated. If there are doubts in your mind about the fundamental beliefs of Islam, then question, discuss, debate, study, and solve them BUT you are not allowed to leave Islam or desert your own *fitra*!

On the issue of openly rejecting Islam, Islam cannot just stand aside and see one of its followers going astray. It would allow discussions to understand and solve the problems, but not allow its followers to lower themselves from the sublime status of "surrendering to the will of Allah—Islam" to the status of those "who have hearts but do not understand, ears but do not hear, and eyes but do not see."

5. APOSTASY IS EQUAL TO TREASON

Why does Islam not allow apostasy? Apostasy or *irtidãd* in Islam is equal to treason.

The Western world limits treason to political and military terms. In the USA, treason consists "only in levying war against Americans, and in adhering to their enemies, giving them aid and comfort." However, sometimes even the Western world stretches the concept of political treason to include things which are non-politics or non-military matters. For example, in England, treason includes violating the King's consort, or raping the monarch's eldest married daughter, as well as the sexual violation of the wife of the eldest son and heir. Even now, "polluting" the Royal bloodline or obscuring it is included in the definition of treason.[5]

Why has England included such non-political and non-military matters in treason? It has done so because the Royal family and the purity of its bloodline is one of the most significant parts of the British society and culture. In Islam, the concept of treason is not limited to political and military aspects; it also has a spiritual and cultural dimension to it. In the Islamic order of sacredness, Allah, then the Prophet, and

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[5] See Professor Ali Mazrui, *The Satanic Verse or a Satanic Novel,* p. 4-5, who probably is the first Muslim to have used the term treason in comparison with apostasy in the context of the Rushdie affair.

then the Qur'ãn occupy the highest positions. *Tawhid, nubuwwa,* and *qiyãma* form the constitution of Islam. Just as upholding and protecting the constitution of a country is sign of patriotism, and undermining it is a form of treason—in the same way **open rejection** of the fundamental beliefs of Islam by a Muslim is an act of treason. Apostasy, i.e., the public declaration of rejecting the fundamentals of Islam, has also negative influence on the Muslim society; it is indeed a major *fitna*. And that is why Islam has prescribed harsh punishment for *irtidãd*.

It must be emphasized that the *irtidãd* that we are discussing here involves open rejection, without any force and with full realization of what one's statements or actions imply. If a Muslim has a genuine doubt on an Islamic matter, that process of doubting does not automatically classify him as a *murtad*. As long as he is still in state of doubt, the punishment of *irtidãd* is suspended.[6] A *murtad* must fully realize the implications of his open rejection and what it means—casting doubt on the truth and honesty of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as the Messenger of God.

The punishment prescribed by the *sharī'a* for apostasy is death.

Even the terms used by the *sharī'a* for apostates give the idea of treason to this whole phenomenon. "Murtad" means apostate. Murtad can be of two types: *fitri* and *milli*.

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[6] Shaykh Muhammad Hasan al-Najafi, *Jawãhiru 'l-Kalãm,* vol. 6 (Tehran: Dãr al-Kutub al-Islãmiyya, n.d.) p. 46. According to Fakhrul Muhaqqiqin al-Hilli, it is obligatory to resolve the doubt(s) that are raised by the potential apostate. See his, *Iidhãhu 'l-Fawã'id,* vol. 4 (Qum: al-'Ilmiyyah, 1387) p. 550.

(1) "Murtad Fitri" means a person who is born of a Muslim parent and then he rejects Islam. *"Fitrah"* means creation. The term "murtad fitri" implies that the person has apostated from the faith in which he was born.

(2) "Murtad Milli" means a person who converted to Islam and then later on he rejects Islam. *Milli* is from *millat* which means religion. The term "murtad milli" implies that the person has apostated from his religion and the Muslim community.

In the first case, the apostasy is like the treason against God; whereas in the second case, the apostasy is like the treason against the Muslim community. Probably, that is why the Shī'ī jurisprudence deals with these two kinds of murtads differently:

- A former kãfir who became a Muslim and then apostates (*murtad milli*), he is given a second chance: if he repents, then he is not to be killed; but if he does not repent, then he is to be killed.
- But one who is born as a Muslim and then apostates (*murtad fitri*), he is to be killed even if he repents. It is important to understand that in case a *murtad fitri* repents, Allãh may accept his repentance and he may be forgiven in the hereafter, but he still has to go through the punishment prescribed for his treason in this world.[7]

This punishment is only applicable in case of apostasy by men; in case of women, the punishment is not death but life imprisonment. And if such a woman repents, then her repentance is accepted and the punishment is lifted.

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[7] For a detailed discussion on the acceptance of the repentance (*tawba*) by a *murtad fitri,* see the transcript of the late Ayatullãh al-Khu'í's lectures by Shaykh al-Gharawi, *at-Tanqíh,* vol. 3, p. 224-229.

In writings of some of the Shī'ī jurists, one gets the sense that the punishment of murtad is to be implemented only in *dãru 'l-Islãm* (i.e., the Muslim world), and that if the murtad flees to *dãru 'l-kufr* (i.e., the abode of *kufr*), then he is not to be pursued.[8]

6. THE *SHARI'AH* SOURCES

What are the sources for these laws? In Shī'a Islam, the primary sources of sharī'ah laws are the Qur'ãn and the sunnah (of the Prophet and the Imams of Ahlul Bayt).[9]

However, on the issue of apostasy, the Qur'ãn only talks about the consequence of an apostate in the hereafter: whether his repentance will be accepted or not; the nullification of his good deeds; and the punishment in the hereafter. The laws dealing with worldly punishments for apostasy have been outlined in the authentic and reliable *ahãdíth* of the Imams of Ahlul Bayt (a.s.).[10]

Here is a selection of the *ahãdíth* on this issue:

1. Shaykh al-Kulayni narrates a *sahíh* (correct) *hadīth* from 'Ammãr as-Sãbãti who said: I heard [Imam] Abu 'Abdullãh [as-Sãdiq] (a.s.) saying, "A Muslim from among the Muslims who renounces Islam and rejects the prophethood of Muhammad and considers him untrue, then verily his blood is lawful *(mubãh)* for anyone who hears that from him, his wife is to be separated from him the day he

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8 Shaykh al-Mufīd, *al-Muqni'ah* (Qum: Jami'a Mudarrisīn, 1410) pl 781; Ibn Hamzah at-Tūsī, *al-Wasīlah ila Nayli 'l-Fadīlah* (Qum: Maktaba as-Sayyid al-Mar'ashi, 1408) p. 424-5; Muhaqqiq al-Hillī, *Sharã'i' al-Islãm,* vol. 4 (Tehran: al-Istiqlãl, 1409) p. 961-2.

9 For the discussion on the place of the Qur'ãn and the sunnah in sharī'ah, see my *An Introduction to the Islamic Sharī'ah.*

10 Those who know Arabic and have the aptitude to handle the *fiqh istidlãli* text may refer to the late Ayatullãh al-Khu'i's *Mabãni Takmilati Minhãji 's-Salihiyn,* vol. 1, pp. 324-337 for the ahãdith used by our jurists.

became murtad, his wealth will be divided among his heirs, and his wife will observe the *'idda* of a widow (i.e., four months). The Imam is obliged to kill him, and not ask him to seek forgiveness."[11]

2. Shaykh at-Tusi narrates a *sahíh hadíth* from al-Husayn bin Sa'íd who said: I read [a question] in handwriting of a person addressed to [Imam] Abu 'l-Hasan ar-Rizã (a.s.): "A person born as a Muslim, then becomes an unbeliever *(kãfir),* polytheist *(mushrik),* and leaves Islam—should he be asked to seek forgiveness, or should he be killed and not be asked to seek forgiveness?" The Imam (a.s.) wrote: "He should be killed."[12]

3. Shaykh al-Kulayni narrates a *sahíh hadíth* from 'Ali ibn Ja'far from his brother [Imam] Abu 'l-Hasan [Musa al-Kãzim] (a.s.). 'Ali ibn Ja'far said, "I asked him about a Muslim who became Christian." He answered, "He should be killed and not be asked to seek forgiveness." Then I asked: "What about a Christian who becomes a Muslim and then turns away from Islam (i.e., becomes *murtad*)?" He replied, "He should be asked to seek forgiveness; so if he returns [to Islam, then okay], otherwise he should be killed."[13] This hadíth covers both types of murtad: *fitri* as well as *milli*.

4. Shaykh as-Sadûq quotes a *sahíh hadith* from Muhammad bin Muslim who said that [Imam] Abu Ja'far [al-Bãqir] (a.s.) said, "Whoever rejects the prophethood of a prophet/messenger and considers him untrue, then his blood is lawful."[14]

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[11] *Furu al-Kãfi,* vol. 7, p. 257. This *hadith* has also been quoted by Shaykh as-Sadûq, *Man la Yahdhuruhu al-Faqíh,* vol. 3, p.89, and Shaykh at-Tusi, *Tahdhibu 'l-Ahkãm*, vol. 10, p. 136

[12] *Tahdhibu 'l-Ahkãm*, vol. 10, p. 139

[13] *Furu' al-Kãfi,* vol. 7, p. 257. It has also been quoted by Shaykh at-Tusi, *Tahdhibu 'l-Ahkãm*, vol. 10, 138.

[14] *Man La Yahzuruhu 'l-Faqih,* vol. 4, p. 76.

5. Shaykh al-Kulayni quotes a *sahíh hadith* from Muhammad bin Muslim who said, "I asked [Imam] Abu Ja'far [al-Bãqir] (a.s.) about the murtad." He said, "Whoever turns away from Islam and rejects what has been revealed to Muhammad (s.a.w.) after he had been a Muslim, then there is no repentance for him; rather it is obligatory to kill him; and his wife should separate from him, and his wealth should be distributed among his heirs."[15]

All these five *ahãdith* are authentic and sound from the *sanad* (chain of narrators) point of view; and even their meaning is quite clear.[16]

This is the opinion of all the Shī'a jurists. For example, Shaykh Muhammad Hasan an-Najafi, after discussing the ahãdíth on murtad fitri in his renowned encyclopedia of Shī'a jurisprudence, *Jawãhiru 'l-Kalãm,* says: "There is no considerable difference that I have found in the above-mentioned laws; on the contrary, there is unanimity *(ijmã')* of both kinds on them because of the textual evidences quoted earlier."[17]

Neither is this a new or a debatable issue one among the Shī'a jurists. Even the scholars of the past centuries had the same views; for example, Shaykh at-Tusi (d. 460 AH) in *an-Nihãya;* Ibn Idris (d. 598 A.H.) in *as-Sarã'ir;* Ibn Hamza at-Tusi in *al-Wasila*, al-Muhaqqiq al-Hilli (d. 676 AH) in *Sharãya'u 'l-Islãm*, al-'Allãma al-Hilli (d. 726 AH) in

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[15] *Furû' al-Kãfi,* vol. 7, p. 256; it has also been quoted by Shaykh at-Tusi, *Tahdhibu 'l-Ahkãm,* vol. 10, p. 136.

[16] For the authenticity of these ahãdith, see Sayyid Abu 'l-Qãsim al-Khû'ī, *Mabãni Takmilati Minhãji 's-Sãlihiyn,* vol. 1, pp. 324-337 and also the transcript of his lectures by Shaykh al-Gharawi, *at-Tanqíh,* vol. 3, p. 224-229.

[17] *Jawãhiru 'l-Kalãm,* vol. 41, p. 605. By both kinds of unanimity, he means "*al-ijmã' al-manqûl* — the unanimity of jurists of all times as quoted by one or more jurist" as well as "*al-ijmã' al-mahassal* — the unanimity of the jurists of all times as ascertained by studying their views".

Qawã'idu 'l-Ahkãm, and the First Martyr (d. 786 AH) and the Second Martyr in *Sharhu 'l-Lum'ati 'd-Dimishqiyya*. Those who might suspect a division on this issue between the "usūli" and the "akhbãri" schools, should know that even the *muhaddithín* have chapters in their collections of *hadith* on "the punishment for murtad" citing the *ahãdíth* on this subject. See, for example, Shaykh Hurr al-'Ãmili, who has seven pages of ahãdíth under the title *"abwãb haddi 'l-murtad* — sections on the punishment for murtad" in the 18th volume of his *Wasã'ilu 'sh-Shí'a*.

7. WHAT ABOUT THE SUNNI FIQH?

The Sunni *fiqh* is also in agreement with the views mentioned above on the punishment for apostasy. Soon after the Prophet's death, the Sunni caliphate started a widespread campaign of fighting some tribes in the interior of the Arabian Peninsula. The justification used by the caliphate was that the tribes had turned away from Islam; they had become *murtad.* Even historians describe it as "*waq'atu 'r-ridda* — the event of apostasy". Although we do not agree with the accusation leveled against some of those who were killed as "apostates,"[18] but the justification presented by the caliphate shows that the Sunnis also agree with the Shī'a *fiqh* on punishment for those who become *murtad*.

The Sunni author of the authoritative *al-Fiqh 'ala 'l-Madhãhibi 'l-Arba'ah* writes, "The four [Sunni] Imams agree that it is obligatory to kill a person whose apostasy against

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[18] Some such "apotates" like Mãlik bin Nuwayrah did not recognize Abu Bakr as the legitimate successor of the Prophet of Islam, and therefore refused to pay zakãt to him. He was brutally killed by Khãlid bin Walīd who then took Mãlik's wife as his own. There was serious disagreement Abu Bakr and 'Umar ibn Khattãb on Khãlid bin Walīd's un-Islamic and inhuman behaviour. This is a very well known fact to the students of Muslim history.

Islam is proven."[19] The Sunni jurists, however, do not differentiate neither between the *fitri* and the *milli* apostate, nor between male and female apostate.[20]

8. AN EXAMPLE FROM HISTORY

In this connection, I would like to narrate one incident that happened during the conquest of Mecca. When the Prophet Muhammad (known as "mercy for the universe" in the Qur'ãn) marched into the city of Mecca in the 8th year of hijra, he declared a general amnesty for all his enemies. However, the same Prophet named seven or eleven persons "who should be killed even if they are found holding on to the cover of the Ka'bah!"[21] Those who like to understand or evaluate Islam from the secular/humanist point of view must realize that Islam should be judged on its own terms, and not by the secular ideals.

Out of those seven persons, one case is interesting and relevant to our discussion. It is an example of a *murtad milli*—a non-Muslim who became Muslim and then became kãfir again. His name was 'Abdullãh bin Sa'd bin Abi Sarah, a foster-brother of 'Uthmãn bin 'Affãn. He had come to Medina and professed Islam, then he went back to Mecca and become a kãfir again.

In spite of the Prophet's order to kill 'Abdullãh, 'Uthmãn sheltered him till after the conquest, and then brought him to the Prophet and asked for forgiveness. The Prophet remained quite for a while hoping (as he himself said later on) that

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19 'Abdu 'r-Rahmãn al-Jazari, *al-Fiqh 'ala 'l-Madhãhibi 'l-Arba'ah,* vol. 5, p. 423-425.

20 Ibn Rushd al-Hafĩd al-Andulũsi, *Bidãyatu 'l-Mujtahid wa Nihãyatu 'l-Muqtasid,* vol. 2 (Cairo: Maktaba al-Khanji, 1994) p. 383. Abu Hanĩfah, however, believes that a woman apostate should not be killed.

21 See any comprehensive work on the life of the Prophet like *Ta'ríkh Abi 'l-Fidã* and *al-Khamís*.

someone would stand up and implement his standing order by killing ‘Abdullãh. But when no one understood the meaning of his silence, the Prophet granted pardon to him.[22]

This is an example of *murtad milli* (a naturalized Muslim who reverts to *kufr*) who is to be given the chance for repenting; and if he repents, then he is not to be killed. This is exactly what the Shī‘a jurists also say.

One should also realize that by the time of the Prophet’s death, most Muslims were “naturalized Muslims;” and a vast majority of those who were “Muslim by birth” had not yet reached adulthood. So looking for an example of a *murtad fitri* during the Prophet’s lifetime would be unrealistic.

9. WHAT ABOUT THE QUR’ÃNIC VERSES?

One of our brothers on the Ahul Bayt Discussion Group, had presented some Qur’ãnic verses which might give the impression to some that the punishment prescribed for the *murtad* contradicts the teachings of the Qur’ãn. It is important to remember that while the Qur’ãn has generally mentioned the punishment of apostates in the hereafter, it is the sunnah that describes the punishment of apostates in this world. And as we have mentioned earlier, the Islamic laws, the *sharī‘a,* is based primarily on the Qur’ãn as well as the Sunnah.

We shall look at some of those verses.

Verse 3:86-91

> “How can Allãh guide those who have disbelieved after their belief, and (after) they bore witness that the Messenger is true and (after) clear arguments had come to them! Allãh does not guide the unjust people.
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> “The punishment of such people is that upon them is the curse of Allãh, of the angels and of men all together—they

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[22] Ibid.

will remain under the curse for ever nor shall they be respited. (This is the punishment of such people) except those among them who repent after this and amend (their life-style), then Allãh is Forgiving, Merciful.

"Those who disbelieve after their belief and then sink more and more into disbelief, their repentance will never be accepted and they are the ones who have gone astray.

"Those who disbelieve and die while they (still) are unbelievers, (even) the earth full of gold shall not be accepted from them if they (try to) offer it in compensation. They shall have a painful chastisement and they shall have no helpers."[23]

When one studies the context and the occasion when this passage was revealed, it becomes clear that these verses were about some former idol-worshippers or Ahlul Kitãb who had become Muslim, and later on they renounced Islam and fled to Mecca. Some of them (e.g., al-Hãrith bin Suwayd bin as-Sãmit) regretted their apostasy and asked for forgiveness. They were forgiven, and they were allowed to return back to Medina.[24]

As you see, these verses were revealed about the case of one or more *murtad milli* who had fled from the control of Muslims. As we have explained above, in case of *murtad milli,* he is given the chance to repent; and if he repents, then he is not to be killed. This example actually proves that sharī'a law is in accordance with the holy Qur'ãn.

A *murtad milli* who does not repent may flee from the control of the Muslims, but, as the last verse says, he can never flee from the curse of Allãh, the angels and all men together in this world as well as the hereafter.

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23 The translation of the Qur'ãnic verses is my own.

24 See *Majma'u 'l-Bayãn* of at-Tabrasi (a Shī'ī commentary) and *ad-Durru 'l-Manthũr* of as-Suyuti (a Sunni commentary).

Verse 3:105-107

"Do not be like those who became divided and disagreed after clear proofs had come to them, and for them is a grievous chastisement on the day (of resurrection) when some faces shall turn 'white' and some faces shall turn 'black'. (It will be said to those whose faces turn 'black',) 'Did you disbelieve after your faith? Then taste the chastisement because of your disbelieving.'"

This verse is talking about the chastisement of *murtad* in the hereafter. It does not automatically follow that there is no punishment for them in this world. Affirmation of one does not automatically deny the other. For example, if verse 4:93 says "Whoever kills a believer intentionally, his punishment is hell, in it he shall dwell forever. Allãh will send His wrath on him, curse him and prepare a painful chastisement for him" — this does not mean that there is no worldly punishment for a murderer. The worldly punishment for murder could be found in other verses of the Qur'ãn or the *sunna*.

Verse 3:176-178

"(O Muhammad!) Do not be grieved by those who sink into disbelief hastily—they can never do any harm to Allãh. Allãh (has given them respite in this world as He) intends that He should not give them any share of the (blessings of the) hereafter and they shall have a grievous chastisement. Those who have bought disbelief at the price of faith shall never do any harm to Allãh and they shall have a painful chastisement."

Firstly, these two verses were revealed with the verses before them in connection with the Battle of Uhud. The verses refer to the idol-worshippers and infidels of Mecca who had come to fight the Muslims; it has no connection with apostasy. Probably the brother looked at the words in N.J.

Dawood's translation "quickly renounce their faith" and assumed that it refers to Muslims becoming kãfirs. No, not at all.

Secondly, the brother has deduced from this verse that "the apostates should live". This is also an incorrect understanding. "God intends to give them no share in the Hereafter" does not mean that Allãh desires that such people should live longer in this world. It just means that their prolonged life should not be taken as an indicator *by them* that they are okay in the eyes of Allãh. This concept is further clarified in the next verse: *"The unbelievers should not think that We are granting them respite for their own good, rather We grant them respite so that they may (eventually) increase in sins and (accordingly) they shall have a disgraceful chastisement."* (3:178) For example, Saddam should be killed by anyone who has the opportunity to do so; but, if he escapes punishment at the hands of the believers, then he should not think that God is on his side—no; the more he lives, the more his sins will increase, and he will deserve even more chastisement in the hereafter.[25] So "giving respite" does not mean suspending the punishment or leaving the judgement to the hereafter.

Verse 4:136

> What is the matter with you, then, that you have become two parties about the hypocrites, while Allãh has degenerated them because of what they have earned? Do you wish to guide him whom Allãh has abandoned in error? And whomsoever Allãh abandones in error, you shall by no means find for him a way (out of error).
>
> They desire that you should disbelieve as they have disbelieved so that you might be all alike, therefore do not

[25] This was written in 1998; presently Baghdad's Butcher is in prison and on trial.

> take friends from among them until they (truly believe and) emigrate in the way of Allãh. But if they turn back (from belief and migration), then seize them and kill them wherever you find them, and do not take from them any as a friend or a helper. (Seize and kill such people) except those (among them) who reach a tribe with whom you are joined in an alliance, or who come to you with hearts constricted from fighting you or fighting their own people...Therefore if they withdraw from you and do not fight you and (instead) offer you peace, then (know that) Allãh has not given you permission (to fight) against them. (4:89-90)

First of all, these verses are about the polytheists of Mecca in general—the *kuffãr* as well as those who became *murtad.* They do not talk about individuals and their punishment.

Secondly, even if we concentrate on the Meccans who had come to Medina, accepted Islam as their faith, and then returned back to Mecca and became kãfir—we see that this is the case of *murtad milli.* And the verses clearly state that if they return back to Islam, then you can take them as friends. But if they do not return to Islam, then "seize them and kill them wherever you find them".

Thirdly, later part of the passage talks about a situation where such groups or individuals form an alliance with tribes (or countries) with whom you also have a peace treaty, then that peace agreement would now cover them also; and, therefore, you should not do anything to them. This is seen in the views of the jurists who say that if a *murtad* flees from dãru 'l-Islãm, then it is not obligatory to pursue him and kill him.[26]

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[26] See note no. 6.

These are just some examples of how to study the Qur'ãnic verses: in their proper historical context and not just in isolation. Other similar verses can be understood in the same light.

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10. SOME RELATED ISSUES

Before we end this discussion, few comments on couple of side issues are necessary.

The Qur'ãn & the Sharí'ah: In the heated discussion on the Ahlul Bayt Discussion Group, I noticed that some people talk about the laws of Islam by assuming or seeming to assume that the only valid source for Islamic views is the holy Qur'ãn; and that if something is not in the Qur'ãn, it is not authentic enough or substantially Islamic! Dear followers of Ahlul Bayt (a.s.), this is a very misleading trend of thinking; the Qur'ãn is the constitution of Islam but not the only source of Islamic views and laws. The Muslims, from day one, firmly believe in the *sunna* as the second most important source and a complement to the holy Qur'ãn. So just by referring to the Qur'ãn without looking at the *sunna,* or how the Prophet and the Imams explained the Qur'ãn, and how the first generations and the later experts have understood the relevant verses and the ahãdíth is, to say the least, a naive way of looking at Islam. Looking at Islam from this narrow angle would place even the daily prayers of the Muslims outside Islam.

Lastly, even when studying the Qur'ãn, it is important not to impose one's preconceived ideas on it otherwise one would be guilty of *tafsir bi 'r-ray.* Those who accuse others of imposing their "eastern cultural" underpinning upon the Qur'ãn should themselves also refrain from imposing their "western, secular, humanist" values upon the Qur'ãn! Let the Qur'ãn be the guide.

Bahã'is in Iran: I have noticed tempers flaring up on both sides of debate in how the Islamic Republic of Iran is dealing with the Bahã'is in that country. I would just like to draw the attention of our brothers that if a Bahã'i is prosecuted in Iran, it does not *automatically* follow that it is because he or she is a Bahã'i. Just as a Bahã'i might be tried for a criminal offence according to Iranian laws similarly a Shī'a or a Sunni Iranian might also be tried and prosecuted. The western powers have some cards up their sleeves that are very readily used against any country that they do not like—cards of human rights, democracy, and minority rights.

Take, for example, the case of the Branch Davidian cult and its leader David Koresh in Waco, Texas. It was a minority religious group. The US government forces put them under siege for 51 days, and finally, on August 17, 1993, their whole compound was burnt down; 95 lives were lost. The US government presented it simply as a "law and order" issue: that a group had piled up arms and ammunitions illegally, and, therefore, the government was justified in taking the extreme action. The US public as well as the international community —with all its propaganda apparatus of human rights, democracy and minority rights— readily accepted that justification. Now if this same case had taken place in Iran with some Bahã'is or in Egypt with some Coptic Christians —that a minority religious group committed illegal action and the government took appropriate action to enforce its laws— I am absolutely certain that the so-called international community and its media, the UNO, and the human rights organizations would have portrayed the issue as a Muslim country persecuting its non-Muslim minority!

What I mean to say is that if you hear that a member of a minority has been prosecuted in Iran, it does not automatically mean that it is because he is a non-Muslim. It

could be that he has committed a crime and has therefore been convicted of that crime. Many groups try to gain political mileage out of such cases; they would exploit it and present it as a violation of human/minority rights. Another example where such issues are used to gain sympathy in the west is the issue of *hijãb* in Iran. There are many Iranians in Canada who do not have valid grounds for getting refugee status; but they know the political climate of this country and therefore exploit it by saying, if the person happens to be a woman, that "I was put in jail because I refused to put on the *hijãb*." They are not truly against the Iranian government; but they know that by making such statements, they will get the refugee status more easily.

One cannot pass judgement on such reports without knowing all the circumstances, especially when the report comes from biased sources. *"O you who believe! If a sinful person [read: unreliable/biased source] comes to you with a news, then investigate; otherwise you will harm [at the least, intellectually] a people because of your ignorance, and then feel regretful for what you did."* (49:6)

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